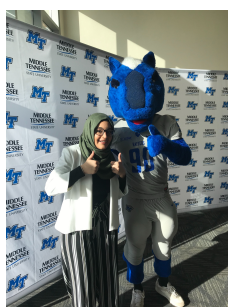


Meet the Covid Class of 2020



They were born after 9/11, and they entered adulthood in the middle of a pandemic. Meet a generation bookended by tragedy.

By John Branch and Campbell Robertson May 30, 2020

Charlie Forster was at the library one afternoon in March when he ran into a friend from Allderdice High School in Pittsburgh.

“I was like, ‘Do you want to come over to my house?’” he said. “So we took the bus home and made grilled cheeses and watched that movie ‘Her,’” which explores isolation and relationships nurtured via electronic devices.

Little did he know that the coronavirus that was spreading across the country would give him and his friends their own lesson in being alone. Their new life started to become clear not long after, when Charlie checked in with another friend about plans to meet for lunch.

“She was like, ‘My parents -- my mom just read an article about social distancing and is outlawing any get-togethers,’” he recalled.

And so that was it. That bland Friday afternoon of grilled cheese and watching “Her” was the last social occasion of senior year, filling in for graduation, prom, senior signing day, the band trip, the musical (it was to be “Curtains”), the lingering in late-night diners each night after the musical performances, the house parties, the mindless banter between classes -- all of it.

Instagram was all they would get.

Years from now, generations from now, this senior class's brush with a pandemic may prove a lasting bond. Some among the 3.7 million high-school seniors who are expected to graduate this year will tell people, "Yes, I was in the class of 2020," and people will nod, knowingly — oh, that year — and want to hear their tales.

Virginia

I do feel special, in a sad way, in that our class is going to be remembered as the class that didn't get to do all the stuff because of coronavirus. Sometimes it feels like that's how we're going to be remembered: That's the corona class.

VIRGINIA CHANDLER, NORFOLK, VA.



In some ways, the class of 2020 was made for this. Most were born in the months just after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, a day that scrambled all notions of comfort and predictability and left them to grow up in a country much different, more wary, than the one their parents had been born into.

They were second graders when the first African-American president in history was elected. They were fifth graders at the time of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. They were freshmen when another history-making president, this one through his defiance of conventions, took office.

Yet this latest news event they were living through felt personal. In dozens of interviews with graduating high school seniors across the country, they talked about suspended relationships and disrupted college plans, about getting jobs to support their laid-off parents and finding surprising and deep new friendships online.

Covid-19 has altered them, disrupted them, redirected them. It may yet define them.



Maya

It's sort of been like an impending doom at all times. I haven't broken down, but I've been like, 'Oh, my God, this is all not right.' I understand that this is how it has to be, but it doesn't make it feel any better. Nothing feels quite right and everything feels like it's sort of off. I just wanted a normal senior year, and I didn't get that.

MAYA SRINIVASAN, PALM HARBOR, FLA.

When Everything Changed

Senior year was down to its final months. The threat came like a breeze that portends a thunderstorm. Their teachers had talked about a virus that was causing lockdowns and death on the other side of the world, and now it was here. It was everywhere.

Grandparents were falling sick in nursing homes. The N.B.A. postponed its season and concerts were abruptly canceled. Within no time, schools sent all of them home.

I had a test and a scholarship due that day. I was scrambling to get it all done. My mom picked me up from school early and my friends wanted to hang out. But I was so tired from the night before that I really didn't want to go. I went straight into the living room and went to sleep and I did not know that I wouldn't see them again. I haven't seen them since.

KAILA FORTE, DURHAM, N.C.

Brice Patterson was in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, with friends, getting reports from home in Bozeman, Mont. "Everything was shut down before we even got back," he said. "I thought, you know, it's just a longer spring break."

At first, it felt like an adventure. A staycation.

Then everything changed.

The economy fell apart. Families faltered. People died by the thousands — sometimes people they knew.

Rawan

When the quarantine first started, when they sent us home the first time, I honestly didn't even think about graduation and prom. I think the first thing I really thought about was, like, I have a friend at school who gets all of her meals from school. She eats at school and that's it. Where is she and the people in the same boat going to get their meals?

RAWAN HAJ-HUSSEIN, MURFREESBORO, TENN.



Rearranged Priorities

The pandemic thrust some teenagers into new roles, their plans altered by the uncertainty of the times.

Jayla St. John, who worked at a Dairy Queen in Wheelersburg, Ohio, before the lockdown, had been planning to attend the University of Cincinnati in the fall to study neuroscience —

something her mother, who dropped out of high school and now manages another Dairy Queen, urged her to do.

“She wants so much different for me and my sisters, so that driving force is kind of what propelled me forward,” Jayla said.

She received scholarships to help defray the costs. But now she worries whether the campus will be open in the fall and whether her program’s future might be threatened in a financial squeeze.

Even more than that, she worries about her mother, still working through it all. In the inside-out world of the coronavirus, a job at Dairy Queen was deemed essential.

Jayla

I have family members who work at grocery stores. I have family members who work in fast-food places. And people still like to pretend that it's just a one-off job for a teenager -- you shouldn't be doing this as an adult. That's crazy. It's like, these people are putting their life on the line so that you can have the things that you need for your life.

JAYLA ST. JOHN, WHEELERSBURG, OHIO



After years of being told that a diploma was a ticket to independence, high school seniors were reminded that they were still tethered to the fortunes of their families. How does a graduating senior's future change if a parent gets sick or goes bankrupt? How does a restaurant like the one Elodie Tougne's family runs in Chicago stay solvent when it cannot welcome customers inside?

It's not too great. We don't know if we might have to close or not. I've been carrying out deliveries for people. I'm pretty worried. We just don't know.

ELODIE TOUGNE, CHICAGO

In Novato, Calif., Liliana Flores lives in a rented house with her mother, aunt and brother, all immigrants from Mexico. She hopes to go to college in the fall, but at this point she is more worried about whether her family can pay the rent.

Her mother waits tables at a restaurant. Her aunt works at a grocery store. Her 19-year-old brother works at a big-box store. They are all pitching in, scrimping to keep things going.

The rents are really high here, where we live. My mom is managing it, and my brother has been helping out since he works at Costco. My mom has been really careful about how we should spend money.

LILIANA FLORES, NOVATO, CALIF.

In Arabi, La., near New Orleans, Ashanty Felipe lives with her mother, from Honduras, who works at an oil refinery. Her father, from Mexico, works odd jobs in construction and lawn work.

Ashanty has been spending time tending to a garden, but she worries that she will disappoint her parents.

She was accepted to a number of schools around the country, including the University of San Francisco and Penn State. She chose Louisiana State University because it was closer and more affordable.

But even that choice is up in the air now. She might just take community college courses and pay for them on her own. What's the difference?

It's like, college, you are supposed to be getting a fresh new start. High school is done and you are not getting babied anymore. It's like you're on your own now. And you probably won't get that college experience. Basically it's on a screen.

ASHANTY FELIPE, ARABI, LA.

Living in Isolation

There may be no demographic as ill-equipped for isolation as high-school students in the spring of senior year. They buzz with energy. Sports teams, best friends, new relationships, going to the mall — social contact is an essential part of being a teenager.

And yet isolation has been thrust upon them. Whatever communal novelty existed wore off long ago.

“The days have gotten shorter for me,” said Jaden De La Cruz of San Francisco. “I wake up later. It blends all together. Did a week just pass?”

I am completely, entirely nocturnal at this point.

JAYLA ST. JOHN, WHEELERSBURG, OHIO

Whether they live in the city or the country, many teenagers are experiencing the same feelings of confinement.

Brice, who plans on being a rodeo cowboy, spends parts of his day feeding horses and welding fences and saddle racks. It was one thing to drive the 10 miles or so into Bozeman for school, but being at the house has made it hard to not get distracted from his schoolwork.



Photographs by Mark LaRowe

Brice

The challenge that I find is like keeping myself focused. I have eight horses here. I got a big old shop full of cool toys and tools and stuff that I love using and making stuff with. So it's hard to sit in front of my computer screen, click buttons on something, you know? That almost seems like busywork.

BRICE PATTERSON, BOZEMAN, MONT.

Some students barely logged on at all to work on their spring coursework, undone by a lack of technology or willpower.

Most felt like they were doing less and learning less.

I feel like people assume that you're not really doing full school. But I'm literally sitting here for seven or eight hours on my computer doing schoolwork. Sometimes they'll post the assignments randomly throughout the day. So if you're not on your computer, you can easily miss an assignment. We're learning a whole new platform in a terrible time to do so.

ETHAN JONES, CHICAGO

More worrisome, perhaps, is the emotional toll. Many experienced even more angst than usual. Would unexpected time with parents and siblings help offset feelings of depression — or aggravate them?

In Chicago, Elodie admitted that her family was getting on her nerves. And while she took up landscape painting to pass the time, she mostly just wanted to leave. Leave home. Leave school.

“I'm ready to get a start on my life,” she said.

This quarantine, it's like a big toll on everybody's mental health and how they are doing. I am not going to lie: I have spiraled a little bit. Because I need to go out, because I am a very social person.

ASHANTY FELIPE, ARABI, LA.

Sometimes I'll just sit, I'll call my friends and we'll work, and it'll be, like, a lot of silence. But it's just nice knowing somebody is there with you — just the essence of what you would get when you're in actual school and have people around you.

JAYLA ST. JOHN, WHEELERSBURG, OHIO

We are starting to see that having social interaction in person and in the flesh is significant, and I don't think we are going to take that for granted anymore.

DEVIN SADDLER, LOS ANGELES

Late at night, right before I go to bed, I'll just lie in bed and I'll just think -- and it definitely feels very different then. The stress of it feels very heavy because I'm not doing something, I'm not distracting myself, I'm not working on something.

MAYA SRINIVASAN, PALM HARBOR, FLA.

Changing Relationships

No one warned them about the fragility of their relationships. For 18 years, give or take, their worlds expanded in a series of concentric circles that included parents, siblings, other relatives, day-care providers, friends, classmates and teammates, maybe significant others and co-workers.

Those social circles expand until graduation. And then they fracture. Graduates move out of the house, maybe go off to college. Childhood friendships melt away. Teenage romances break apart.

That happens in normal times. The coronavirus quickened the pace. What might have been expected after graduation happened without ceremony midsemester.

I have always been an introvert. I feel like when I left school, a lot of people stopped contacting me. When they don't contact you after quarantine, you realize that these are people who weren't going to contact you after graduation.

RAWAN HAJ-HUSSEIN, MURFREESBORO, TENN.

In Pittsburgh, Charlie found that he was not talking to high-school friends as much. He has filled the time instead largely with a girl he has never seen in person. He met the girl, Alissa, online in December, as both of them were preparing to attend Oberlin College. Now, they talk regularly via Zoom, Snapchat and text message — about high schools, social life, the other Oberlin people they have met online, how Charlie wears sweatpants every day. He tells her about his first days of high school, so long ago.

In Chicago, Ethan Jones blamed the virus for his breakup. His girlfriend's family left the city for a lake house.



Ethan

We'd be texting all the time and, just gradually, less and less FaceTime, less and less text. And then at one point, we said that it had gotten to the point where we weren't texting each other every few days and then we were like, 'We should just go on a break.' And then we eventually just stopped talking at all.

ETHAN JONES, CHICAGO

I really needed this break. Like, I was really stressed out my senior year. It's been the hardest school year for me. So just being able to be away from school -- I see it as that.

KAILA FORTE, DURHAM, N.C.

The quarantine, for some, had its benefits, in slowing life down.

For most, though, the timing was all wrong. Things were just getting good. After years of cliques and grudges, awkward phases and social mishaps — the end of high school provides a “Breakfast Club” moral to the story: Everyone realizes they have been in this together.



Charlie

It felt really cliquey, especially freshman year. You know that classic scene in ‘Mean Girls?’ -- like all the different cliques that have the different tables? It took until this year for everything to kind of die down and everybody to get their heads screwed on a bit straighter. At this point, it’s like, why would you continue beefing with the people that you’ve been beefing with for the past three years when you’re not going to see him a ton after this year?

CHARLIE FORSTER, PITTSBURGH

It is why senior classes cry at their graduations. And it is what makes the current situation especially difficult for this class. The coronavirus destroyed all the traditional ways of saying goodbye.

Our class had just gotten really close. We were all at that point in time where everyone knew each other really well. Everyone was going out of their comfort zone. Everything was coming to a close, so everyone was becoming more sentimental. It was like a family that had to be taken apart.

VIRGINIA CHANDLER, NORFOLK, VA.

I emailed a few teachers that I really cared about. But I didn't get the chance to tell them how grateful I was for them, how much they had done for me.

RAWAN HAJ-HUSSEIN, MURFREESBORO, TENN.

Missed Opportunities

Learning from home is one of the few things the shutdown did not change for Sanaa Dukes of New Orleans. She had been home-schooled all of her life.

Several afternoons a week, though, she would go to the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music to see friends and rehearse on the piano, getting ready for the spring concert.

She had been preparing for two years to play Beethoven's "Pathétique" sonata, along with two other pieces. She was scheduled to play saxophone, too, at Jazz Fest, but that was canceled, too.

Her music teacher got the virus. He recovered, but Dukes suspects she will never practice with him again. Ellis Marsalis, for whom the center was named, caught the virus and died.

I still practice sometimes, but I kind of feel like, 'What's the point of playing my hard pieces when I don't have anything to play it at?' There's no — motivation -- that's the word.

SANAA DUKES, NEW ORLEANS

And the canceled graduations? What is lost? It is hard to grasp the meaning of something that does not happen.

The love that rains from the bleachers, the energy of the last gathering of one-time strangers who became a class.

The calling of the name. The handshake on the stage. The childhood left behind.

I know my mother feels very upset about it, just very bummed about it. But I think one day, maybe on the day when graduation is supposed to happen, it's all going to hit. I think I'm just putting off dealing with the emotions of, 'Wow everything's gone.'

MAYA SRINIVASAN, PALM HARBOR, FLA.

There may be no moving out of the house, no moving into college dorms. There may be more online courses, but more difficult this time.

There may be changes in the plans: Defer for a year, work instead, take a look at the military. The bends in the road ahead can be blind and slick.

But the class of 2020 knows that. The future is coming, no matter what.

Through the winter and into spring, Liliana, from Novato, had lost hope of graduating from high school. She failed English and history earlier in high school. She joined the school's R.O.T.C. program to gain some discipline, and it worked. She grew into a leader.

But she was still short enough credits to graduate. Time was running out and she had a huge course load.

"Before this hit, my mind-set was, like, for a month, I was totally giving up — I have no way of finishing all my classes," Liliana said.

Then, school closed and went to online learning. The district soon did away with grading, giving students the option of credit or no credit. Then it postponed graduation, eventually moving it to August. Liliana felt "remotivated," she said. "If graduation was in June, I probably wouldn't have walked. But in August? I'll be there, 100 percent."

No one knows how the coronavirus will shape who they become.

For now, they are the ones the others feel sorry for. They are the ones losing out on the life they were promised. But many of them are not ready to see themselves that way.

Maya Srinivasan said she had to take the valedictorian speech she had written before the coronavirus and recast it. In this version, the future was more unknown than ever, but it was still in her generation's hands.

I was going to say, 'We're the class of 2020. We have perfect vision. We know how to make our future better.'

That message changed once the coronavirus happened. I rewrote it. We've been expecting senior year and graduation for four years and it didn't happen like it was supposed to. So the lesson that I want people to learn from it is to take risks -- and that nothing in life is promised. Nothing is guaranteed.

MAYA SRINIVASAN, PALM HARBOR, FLA.

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